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History

William Wallace: The Man Behind the Legend

DeAnna Stevens

"The Uprising" Albannach

I wonder what you felt inside, as they dragged you through foreign streets
The townsfolk spat venom at you, as churchmen took their seats
And did you think of your Motherland, as you stood there centre stage
Or did you feel suppression, Dear Sir, like an animal in a cage?

I wonder what you felt inside, as they hung you by your throat
Through tear-welled eyes you looked out, as the crowd began to gloat.
And when they cut you down, so that your body slammed the ground
Did you pray to God for strength, Dear Sir, to fight another round?

I wonder what you felt inside, when you burned with ropes pulled tight
Did you see the glee upon their faces, as they watched you lose the fight?
And when every inch of your body cried out, with a burning, searing pain,
Did it ever cross your mind, Dear Sir, "was it all in vain"?

I wonder what you felt inside, when you met the butcher's blade
Did you see their blank expressions, as they watched your life-force fade?
Or did your soul break free from the pain and the hurt, to a pine covered glen
And will you ever know, Dear Sir, what a hero you became?

Aye, will you ever know, Dear Sir, what a hero you became?

(shouted)

Don't fear their cannons or their muskets!

Charge with me!

We fight for what we love, we fight for our country!

Scotsmen, charge, for Scotland!

Legends grow up in every country throughout the world. They sometimes create national heroes and provoke a sense of pride and patriotism. Though usually inaccurate and based on myth, every so often a legend is born out of historical events and based on real people. This is the case with the Scottish hero William Wallace. Wallace was a flesh and blood man who had no idea that he would one day become a national hero of Scotland and an international legend; however, in the right time and in the right circumstances, normal becomes exceptional and exceptional becomes legendary.

The first historical account of William Wallace is that of Henry the Minstrel, otherwise known as Blind Harry. Blind Harry wrote *The history of the life, adventures, and heroic actions of the celebrated Sir William Wallace* in the fifteenth century, approximately one hundred and fifty years after the execution of Wallace. Once thought of as a

historically accurate rendition of Wallace's life, it is known to be filled with inaccuracies and romantic embellishments. However, Blind Harry's account is still referenced in biographies and comparisons between reality and legend.

Details of William Wallace's birth are lost. Blind Harry wrote that Wallace was born in Ellerslie to Malcolm Wallace and a daughter of Sir Ronald Crawford.¹ Some historians claim that Wallace was born around 1270 and was the second son of Sir Malcolm Wallace.² Others state that Wallace was born anywhere between the years 1260 and 1278 and that he was born either at Ellerslie, Elderslie, or Renfrewshire, that his father was Malcolm, Andrew, or William, and that his mother was Jean, Joan, Margaret, or an unnamed woman.³ Speculation also is rampant on the number and gender of Wallace's siblings, whether he was born into a minor or major noble family, or if he was a commoner with no claim to any noble heritage.⁴ Historian Fiona Watson states that the "lack of verifiable evidence, or even relatively certain supposition, for the life and deeds of the man is both a blessing and a curse."⁵ The blessing of no clear evidence means that the mystery and legendary status of Wallace will continue to increase. However, for historians who try to provide the reality behind the legend, the lack of evidence is a curse.

One of the foremost and well-known biographers of Wallace is Andrew Fisher. In studying the few writings by Wallace that still exist, Fisher believes that Wallace was the son of Alan Wallace, evidenced in a letter Wallace wrote after the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. The inscription on the seal states "[Wilelm]vs Filius Alani Walais," which translates to "William, son of Alan Wallace."⁶ By his own seal, Wallace declares his father as Alan Wallace. Fisher has traced the lineage of Alan Wallace and has been able to reconstruct some background information on the family. Alan Wallace had sworn allegiance to King Edward I of England, as had so many other Scottish nobles in order to gain wealth and protection from the English crown. Fisher also found evidence that William Wallace had two brothers, Malcolm and John. William supported the Baliol family, whose authority as rulers of Scotland was increasingly undermined by Edward I. Malcolm supported Robert the Bruce, a rival for the Scottish throne. John Wallace also supported Robert the Bruce, an action for which he paid in 1304 when he was executed for treason against the crown of England. Fisher also states that if Alan Wallace was the father of William, then William's birthplace would probably have been in Ayrshire rather than the commonly believed Elderslie.⁷

It is not clear what caused William Wallace to turn so violently against the English in May 1297. However, it is true that Wallace killed William Heselrig, sheriff of Lanark. Legend records that Wallace was avenging the murder of his beloved wife, Marion Braidfute, whom he had married in secret. Blind Harry's poetically written account follows:

Ev'n then she shakes at Hesilrig's fierce hate,
And her soul shrinks, as previous to her fate.
Now fierce with rage the cruel foe draws near,
Oh! does not Heaven make innocence its care?
Where fled thy guardian angel in that hour,
And left his charge to the fell tyrant's power?
Shall his fierce steel be reddened with thy gore,
And streaming blood distain thy beauties o'er?
But now awoken'd with the dreadful sound,
The trembling matron threw her eyes around,
In vain, alas! were all the tears she shed,
When fierce he wave the faulchion o'er her head,
All ties of honour by the rogue abjur'd,
Relentless deep he plung'd the ruthless sword;
Swift o'er her limbs does creeping coldness rise,
And death's pale hand seal'd up her fainting eyes.

The description of Wallace's reaction by Blind Harry, is detailed and full of vengeance:

Then let those tears to war's rough toils give way,
And the fierce sword perform what words would say.
Hear me, brave Graham, companion of my arms,
Whose soul alike is fir'd with glory's charms.
To thee I swear, this sword I'll never sheath,
Till I revenge my dearest dearest's death.
Heavens! what new toils of death and war remain?
Rivers of floating blood, and hills of slain!
But steel'd with rage, to slaughter let us fly,
And for her sake there shall ten thousand die.

The murder of Marion Braidfute may have enraged Wallace enough to kill Heselrig. Or Heselrig may have instigated a murder or attack on someone else close to Wallace. Alternatively, Fisher states that evidence presented at Wallace's trial in 1305 indicates Heselrig was killed on the day he held court in Lanark. Fisher offers two possible explanations. The first is that Heselrig entered a judgment against Wallace and was murdered in retaliation. Of the second explanation, Fisher believes it to be most plausible. The murder of Heselrig may have been a crime of opportunity in which Wallace saw a way to strike a blow against a representative of the English crown while dispensing judgment on the Scottish people.⁸ Whatever his motives were, there is no question that Wallace murdered Heselrig. The act could not have occurred at a more opportune time to catapult Wallace to the forefront of the Scottish rebellion. His band of supporters grew enormously in response to the death of Heselrig. Wallace was seen as unafraid to act and willing to dispose of Englishmen, even if he aroused the anger of the powerful king of England, Edward I.

When the English army advanced on Stirling Bridge in September 1297 in retaliation for the continuous Scottish rebellions and raids into England, William Wallace and the nobleman Andrew de Moray led the Scottish forces. When the English arrived, James Stewart, the High Steward of Scotland, and Malcolm, Earl of Lennox, a Scot whose forces had previously fought with the English, approached the Scots in an effort to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Wallace and Moray rejected the offerings of their fellow Scotsmen. The English forces, led by the Earl of Surrey, settled in for the night and prepared for battle.

The English must have confused the Scots the next morning. The bridge was barely wide enough for two mounted soldiers to ride abreast, forcing the vanguard to take a long time to cross. Then, once they had crossed, they were called back across the bridge because the Earl of Surrey was still in bed. The vanguard began crossing the bridge a second time after the Earl had risen only to be called back again upon the return of James Stewart and the Earl of Lennox. Upon learning that Wallace and Moray had declined a peace settlement, the Earl of Surrey sent two Dominican Friars to the Scots' leaders in one last attempt to settle the matter without bloodshed. According to the account of Walter Hemingborough of Guisborough Priory, the friars returned with a message from Wallace: "Take back this reply, that we are not here to make peace but to do battle to defend ourselves and liberate our kingdom. Let them come on and we shall prove this in their very beards."⁹

The Scots, after seeing the two previous crossings, decided to take the offensive and attack the English at the most opportune time. The third time the English crossed Stirling Bridge, the Scots waited until the cavalry and infantry vanguard of 2,000 arrived.¹⁰ The movie *Braveheart* took liberties with this battle and showed the two armies advancing toward each other on a large meadow. Mel Gibson, as William Wallace, spoke with eloquence and roused the troops into an uproar. He ended his speech, declaring "they may take our lives but they will never take our freedom."¹¹ While no record of any such speech survives from the real battle, some sort of encouraging talk probably was given prior to the attack. In the real battle, horns would have blared, weapons pounded against shields, and war cries screamed as the Scots ran towards the English soldiers. Fearsome to the English already across the bridge, the sight was a death sentence. Pinned between the oncoming Scots and the river behind, and with troops still on the bridge, the English had no choice but to fight the advancing enemy. The Scots lowered their long spears, met the cavalry, and pushed the entire English force back into the river.¹² The English on the south side of the bridge, defeated by a commoner, a noble warrior, a savage outlaw, or a natural born leader, depending on the sources, retreated. Wallace had managed to overcome the advantage of the much larger, well organized English army.

The Battle of Stirling Bridge sparked the beginning of the legend

of William Wallace. The debates about where he came from do not change the simple fact that Wallace defeated the overwhelming English with a smaller force. The tactics used at Stirling Bridge took intelligence, courage, and a steady heart to implement. Wallace proved that he had the necessary composition to lead men into battle. In reward, he was knighted and conferred with the title of Guardian of Scotland by March 29, 1298.¹³

In the absence of a king, a man of lower birth had risen to the highest power in Scotland at that time. In fighting to protect his country, William Wallace was already beginning to take on legendary status before his death. In *Braveheart*, commoners talk of William Wallace and his achievements after the Battle of Stirling Bridge, bragging about how many men he had killed, the story changing from fifty men to one hundred men. The Scots found a sense of pride in being Scottish and rallied behind Wallace. The English, on the other hand, spread fear about Wallace in an effort to have him captured. Propaganda described Wallace as “an ogre of unspeakable depravity who skinned his prisoners alive, burned babies and forced the nuns to dance naked for him.”¹⁴

In a turn of events, the Battle of Falkirk brought about the defeat of William Wallace and the end of his major role in Scotland. In a pitched battle Wallace met the English, employing the same type of tactics used at Stirling Bridge. At first, it seemed as if the strategy and the ground itself would work in his favor. However, the English broke through the Scots’ line of spearmen. Wallace retreated to the North.¹⁵ No clear evidence exists that Scottish nobles betrayed Wallace that day, as has been suggested. However, legend indicates that John III Comyn, another rival for the Scottish throne, and his cavalry abandoned Wallace on the battlefield. Possibly, Comyn may have been chasing his own cavalry in order to turn them around and join the fight. Stories also report that Robert the Bruce took the field that day on the side of Edward I. Robert, though, was rumored to be fifty miles away in Ayr Castle.¹⁶ *Braveheart* drew on these stories of betrayals, giving them extended life in the theatrical portrayal of the Battle of Falkirk. In the movie, Wallace calls on the cavalry of the nobles to join the battle, but they turn and ride away, abandoning Wallace. Robert the Bruce protects Edward I from Wallace’s attack,¹⁷ but he also saved Wallace’s life before Edward’s men reached him as he lay injured.

William Wallace resigned as Guardian of Scotland after his defeat at Falkirk. As fast as he rose in prominence, he returned to outlaw status. Relentless, Edward I never forgot Wallace and the trouble he had caused. The English king engaged Scottish nobleman Sir John de Mentieth to carry out the arrest of Wallace. No evidence explains why Mentieth betrayed Wallace in spite of the fact that Mentieth had at one time been a close friend of Wallace’s.¹⁸ After his capture on August 23, 1305, William Wallace was transported to Westminster to stand trial for treason.

The trial was nothing more than a reading of William Wallace's crimes against the King of England. The judges accused him of killing English priests and nuns, stealing relics from churches, murder, treason, and numerous other charges. His only reply was that he had never sworn allegiance to Edward I. Sentenced to death, Wallace faced his accusers in silence.

The method of execution for a man like William Wallace guaranteed his place in history. Hanged, drawn, disemboweled, quartered and beheaded, Wallace's head was placed on London Bridge. The quarters of his body were publicly displayed, one each in Newcastle, Perth, Berwick, and, most likely, Aberdeen at Stirling. The display of Wallace's body parts was meant to stifle any further thought of rebellion. Nine years passed before Robert the Bruce led the Scots at Bannockburn in 1314 and won independence for Scotland.¹⁹

More than seven centuries after his execution, William Wallace is still an integral part of Scotland's history. No matter whose declarations are the loudest, the truth is that there is simply not enough evidence to provide a clear history of his life. However, Scotland, and the world know the most important fact about him. Wallace fought for Scotland's independence, not because he wanted to be a hero, but because he simply wanted his country to be free.

Notes

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² Graeme Morton, *William Wallace: Man and Myth*, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004.

³ James Mackay, *William Wallace*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company (Edinburgh) Ltd., 1995. Kindle edition.

⁴ Graeme Morton, *William Wallace: Man and Myth*.

⁵ Edward Cowan, ed., *The Wallace Book*, Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2012. Kindle edition.

⁶ Andrew Fisher, *William Wallace*. Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2012. Kindle edition. Location 217 of 4288.

⁷ Andrew Fisher, *William Wallace*, Location 217 of 4288.

⁸ Andrew Fisher, *William Wallace*.

⁹ Peter Armstrong, *Stirling Bridge and Falkirk 1267-98: William Wallace's Rebellion*, Long Island City: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2003, Kindle edition, Location 676-827 of 1555.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Braveheart*, Video, directed by Mel Gibson, (1995: Los Angeles, CA: Amazon Instant Video, 2013).

¹² Peter Armstrong, *Stirling Bridge and Falkirk 1267-98: William Wallace's Rebellion*.

¹³ Andrew Fisher, *William Wallace*, Location 1685-1784 of 4288.

¹⁴ James Mackay, *William Wallace*, Location 2940 of 4593.

¹⁵ James Mackay, *William Wallace*, Location 2956-3143 of 4593.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Braveheart*.

¹⁸ James Mackay, *William Wallace*, Location 4056-4103 of 4593.

¹⁹ Andrew Fisher, *William Wallace*.

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